THE LONDON SUNDAY TIMES MAGAZINE

18 JAN 1970

When Gary Powers's parachute blossomed over Russian territory on May Day, 1960, things began to look bad for the old-time spy. Powers was simply a pilot – his U-2 plane, stacked with all kinds of flashy equipment, was the secret agent. Machines were invading this most obscure and intricate of human activities.

We knew that damp trilbies and upturned coat-collars were on their way out, along with Funf and the shifty glance either way down the dim street before the quick run, clutching a package. But the early morning mists on a bridge in Berlin were still to come – the Wall wasn't built until 1961 – and microdots and ciphers and subtle codes worked into innocent communications seemed to have a reasonably long life ahead of them. In Len Deighton's *Funeral in Berlin*, which was published in 1964, a Russian official proposes a deal to the British government, which is to signify its acceptance by having Victor Silvester play *There's a Small Hotel* on the BBC Overseas Service on a certain day. Harry Palmer frowns, says he doesn't know about that. What is the matter? the Russian asks. You are not sure that you can get Victor Silvester to play *There's a Small Hotel* at the right time? No, Palmer says, that's not it. I'm just not sure that I can stop him.

Powers and, more recently, the Pueblo incident make it clear that the new spy will not have such difficulties. Vyvyan Holt, the British minister in Seoul, who was captured and interned in a Korean camp along with George Blake in 1950, was allowed after 16 months to send a cable to the Foreign Office. In it, he informed them that he and his staff were alive, and asked them to arrange for his bank to pay £50 to his sister for theatre tickets. The Foreign Office cracked [illegible] this request, which was obviously trying to say something. What it was trying to say was that they should arrange for Holt's bank to pay £50 to his sister for theatre tickets. How can a spy ship create these confusions? Who will sanction our paranoia now?

But Powers started worse things than this. The spy will probably be juggling his codes and disguises for quite some time to come, in spite of the mechanical competition. But will he survive the spotlight? Not only did the United States accept responsibility for Powers's overflight, Powers himself was openly exchanged for the Russians' Colonel Abel in February, 1962 – in Berlin, on a bridge, with early morning mists by courtesy of Len Deighton. In other words, espionage had surfaced from the silence of centuries. Governments now admit what they are up to. Spying is no longer a nasty trick played only by the Germans and Russians and little boys and bounders – we all know the CIA is everywhere. The Powers-Abel exchange was followed by the exchange of Makinen and Father Ciszek for the Egorovs in 1963, and of Wynne for Lonsdale in 1964. Wynne wrote a book, Lonsdale wrote a book, the CIA published *The Penkovsky Papers*.

Meanwhile Le Carré had written and sold in quantities *The Spy Who Came In From The Cold*, Len Deighton had written or was writing his Berlin novels. Ian Fleming died and became famous, Sean Connery and Michael Caine emerged as the new heroes. Then reality hit back with the Philby story. *The Observer* and *The Sunday Times* did battle over him, and Philby wrote a book himself. Small wonder that the Sixties look like the decade of the spy.

☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆

We, like the Americans, stumbled into the decade, found our defining image in a flurry of misfortunes. Just as things were settling down after the Burgess and Maclean outcry, there followed, in rapid succession, the Portland case, the Blake case, the Vassall case and the Profumo affair: the first two in 1961, the third in 1962 and the fourth in 1963. Our security, like American innocence over the U-2 plane, became [illegible] which could no [illegible] although there [illegible] Thorneycroft [illegible] Commons that [illegible] ing anomalous about John Vassall's life and career. He simply spent more than two-thirds of his miserable Admiralty salary on a flat in Dolphin Square, had a vast wardrobe of expensive suits, a collection of antiques, and went to Capri and New York for his holidays. Guy Burgess, when asked where he got his money from, would say he was a Russian spy. Everyone would laugh.

The point is not so much that the best cover for an agent is his own character, or something like his own character, although this seems to be true.

The point is rather that when a country finds itself in a certain state of mixed complacency and disarray, an agent doesn't need any cover at all. Yes, George Blake's wife recalled after his arrest, George used to read a lot of Marx and Lenin. Gordon Lonsdale even had a heavy Slavic accent.

Fleming, Le Carré and Deighton were our revenge for all this. We may have let a few secrets leak out, but in return we infiltrated the world with spy stories. Le Carré and Deighton clearly were not trying to whitewash old England in their novels, and Fleming, in contrast, must in some way have believed in the musty British values he peddled. But the final suggestion in each case was the same. Politics is a complex and pointless game, let's turn our backs (Deighton, Le Carré). Fantasies are better than life, they are the only place where we can still see clear moral action (Fleming). Because we as a country have collapsed, the world has collapsed. Le Carré and the Beatles speak very plainly for the politics of the early and middle Sixties. We had no choices. What reasonable man could prefer the "grouse-moor complacency of Macmillan", as Le Carré puts it, to the [illegible]? Or vice-versa? "All governments are the same," Ringo Starr is on record as